

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom?
2. What is the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998?
3. Why are there two reports on international religious freedom?
4. Is the USCIRF a private organization, a religious body, an advocacy organization, or an interest group?
5. Who are the Commission members?
6. How were the Commissioners selected? How long is their term of office?
7. Not all religions are represented on the Commission. Why?
8. Does the United States have the right to tell other countries what to do about freedom of religion? Is this an attempt to force American values on others?
9. Can the Commission implement sanctions on other countries that violate religious freedom?
10. What authority does the United States have to advise other countries about religious freedom?
11. What are the "countries of particular concern?" What sanctions are in place as a result of this designation?
12. What are some of the Commission's notable activities?

13. What are some of the Commission's accomplishments, and have any of the Commission's recommendations been implemented?

14. Does the Commission seek information about violations of religious freedom abroad?

15. Can the Commission intervene in an individual asylum or refugee cases if they are based on a claim of religious persecution?

1. What is the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom?

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and the Congress

[Top](#)

2. What is the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998?

Congress passed the IRFA (Public Law 105-292) to promote religious freedom as a U.S. foreign policy goal and to combat religious persecution in other countries. The law created an Office of International Religious Freedom in the State Department, headed by an Ambassador-at-Large. That office is responsible for issuing a report on religious freedom and persecution in all foreign countries by September 1 of each year. On the basis of that report, the State Department designates "countries of particular concern" for their "systematic, ongoing, and egregious" violations of religious liberty. The law identifies the wide range of diplomatic and economic tools that the President can apply to those countries. To assist the President, the law recommended creation of a special advisor on international religious freedom as part of the National Security Council staff. The law also created the Commission on International Religious Freedom and required it to issue an annual report each May 1. The Commission expires in September 2011.

[Top](#)

3. Why are there two reports on international religious freedom?

The State Department and Commission reports have different purposes. The State Department's report is a country-by-country analysis of religious freedom. The Commission report covers select countries, and makes policy recommendations to the executive and legislative branches of government. The Commission report also critiques the work of the State Department in promoting international religious freedom.

[Top](#)

4. Is the USCIRF a private organization, such as a religious body, an advocacy organization, or an interest group?

The Commission is a government entity created by Congress. It is funded entirely by the federal government on an annual basis and its staff members are government employees. The White House and Congressional leadership appoint the Commissioners.

[Top](#)

5. Who are the Commission members?

Per the Commission's authorizing legislation, "Members of the Commission shall be selected among distinguished individuals noted for their knowledge and experience in fields relevant to the issue of international religious freedom, including foreign affairs, direct experience abroad, human rights, and international law." Commissioners are selected for their expertise, not because they represent specific religious communities. Within the law, the five D. Gaer different appointing authorities (see Question 5) work to provide for a diverse group of Commissioners.

The Commissioners are: the Chair, Felice D. Gaer, the Vice Chairs, Elizabeth H. Prodromou and Michael Cromartie, and Don Argue, Preeta D. Bansal, Imam Talal Y. Eid, Richard D. Land, Leonard A. Leo, and Nina Shea. John V. Hanford III is the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.

When speaking and acting on behalf of the Commission, Commissioners act as individuals on the Commission's behalf and not as representatives of their private sector or religious organizations.

[Top](#)

6. How were the Commissioners selected? How long is their term of office?

Under the IRFA, three Commissioners are selected by the President, four by the congressional leaders of the party not in the White House, and two by the leaders of the President's party in Congress. Currently they are appointed for two years. Commissioners are eligible for reappointment.

[Top](#)

7. Not all religions are represented on the Commission. Why is that?

Per the Commission's authorizing legislation, "Members of the Commission shall be selected among distinguished individuals noted for their knowledge and experience in fields relevant to the issue of international religious freedom, including foreign affairs, direct experience abroad, human rights, and international law." Commissioners are selected for their expertise, not because they represent specific religious communities. Within the law, the five different appointing authorities (see Question 5) work to provide for a diverse group of Commissioners.

[Top](#)

8. Does the United States have the right to tell other countries what to do about freedom of religion? Is this an attempt to force American values on others or to interfere in their internal affairs?

If the United States and another country sign an arms-control agreement, or an environmental agreement, or a trade agreement, all parties to the agreement have the right to ensure that the other parties are fulfilling their commitments. The same is equally true for human rights agreements, including those referring to freedom of religion. The United States is not trying to force other countries to adopt American values; it is encouraging them to live up to the commitments to protect religious freedom that they have made in international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Likewise, other signatories to those agreements have the same right. The "internal affairs" argument used by authoritarian and totalitarian regimes dissolves when those governments undertake international commitments.

[Top](#)

9. Can the Commission implement sanctions on countries that violate religious freedom?

No. The Commission has advisory and monitoring authority only.

[Top](#)

10. What authority does the Commission have to advise other countries about religious freedom?

The Commission is authorized to monitor violations of religious freedom abroad and to make policy recommendations to the President of the United States, the Secretary of State, and to the Congress with respect to matters involving international religious freedom. In gathering information to formulate those recommendations, the Commissioners or staff may meet with foreign officials and diplomats. Such meetings are always coordinated with the State Department.

[Top](#)

11. What are the "countries of particular concern?" What sanctions are in place as a result of this designation?

Countries of particular concern (CPCs) are countries that engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom. The term "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" means systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom, including violations such as a) torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; b) prolonged detention without charges; c) causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine detention of those persons; or d) other flagrant denials of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons. The CPC designation makes these countries subject to U.S. diplomatic and economic actions.

The Secretary of State designates the countries of the particular concern. The countries currently designated as CPCs are:

Burma

China

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK/North Korea)

Eritrea

Iran

Pakistan

Saudi Arabia

Sudan

Turkmenistan

Uzbekistan

Vietnam

The IRFA additionally requires that the Administration take action to oppose religious freedom violations in these countries. The CPC designation is the beginning of focused diplomatic activity on religious freedom and not the end. In addition to CPC designation, the IRFA stipulates that the U.S. government take active steps with CPC countries to address violations and promote freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief. However, since the passage of IRFA, for every country named a CPC in previous years, the only official action taken by any U.S. administration has been to invoke already existing sanctions rather than to take any additional action pursuant to IRFA. This year, for the first time since the passage of IRFA, countries have been designated as CPCs (Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam) that do not have already existing sanctions assigned to them. Moreover, the State Department has not once to date submitted to the Congress the required evaluation of the effectiveness of prior actions against CPCs.

Top

12. What are some of the Commission's notable activities?

The Commission has held hearings to gather information about religious freedom on Bangladesh, Burma, China, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Vietnam, in addition to holding a special hearing on "Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism." The Commission has also testified before Congress (the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the House International Relations Committee, the House Ways and Means Committee, the Congressional Human Rights Caucus) many times on issues including its Annual Reports; China's trade status; the State Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom; anti-Semitism in Western Europe; and on human rights and religious freedom in Afghanistan; China; France; North Korea; Pakistan; Russia; Sudan; Turkmenistan; Vietnam; and religious freedom in various other countries covered in the Annual Reports.

Commissioners and/or staff have traveled to Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bosnia, Egypt, Eritrea, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Italy (including meetings at the Vatican), Indonesia, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Territories, Jordan, Laos, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, Romania, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Syria, South Korea, Sudan, Switzerland (to attend a session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights) Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and the Netherlands (at the invitation of the Dutch to discuss cooperation on religious freedom issues).

The Commission also engages vigorously in outreach to non-governmental communities to raise their awareness of the USCIRF and its work, as well as broader U.S. policy to advance international religious freedom. This outreach is often done in meetings in Washington, D.C. and around the country.

At the end of January 2004, the USCIRF traveled to Los Angeles, California, where it held a hearing at the UCLA School of Law on North Korea, a roundtable with members of the Iranian-American community, and an inter-faith dialogue at the Fuller Theological Seminary. The Commission also met with analysts at the RAND Corporation, the editorial board of the Los Angeles Times, and the President and senior staff of World Vision about the importance of promoting freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief throughout the world.

In April, the Commission visited Colorado to discuss USCIRF's work with leaders of several influential faith-based organizations headquartered in Colorado Springs. The Commissioners met with Reverend Ted Haggard, President of the National Association of Evangelicals; Dr. James Dobson, Founder and Chairman of the Board, Focus on the Family; Don Hodel, President, Focus on the Family; and several other key leaders.

In early June, Commissioner Richard Land traveled to Houston, Texas, where he gave a keynote address entitled, "Global Security and U.S. National Interests: Why Religious Freedom Matters," at The James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University. The Commission has been invited back to The Baker Institute to give a second presentation. Also in Houston, Commissioner Land held an interfaith roundtable hosted by the Houston chapters of the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League. In addition to Houston, Commissioner Land traveled to College Station to meet with Dean Richard Chilcoat and faculty at The Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University to discuss areas of possible future collaboration.

Top

13. What are some of the Commission's accomplishments, and have any of the Commission's recommendations been implemented?

Commission Accomplishments:

-

Successfully recommended that Uzbekistan be added to the State Department's list of "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) in 2006 and that Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea be added to the list in 2004.

-

Launched a major new study in November 2004 led by David Hawk to determine the policies used by the North Korean government to stamp out religious faith and practice, how religious life of any kind survives in North Korea, and whether the cult of personality that surrounds Kim Jong Il and his father operates as a defacto religion.

-

Announced in May 2004, together with the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee and the House Government Reform Committee, that the General Accounting office (GAO) will undertake a comprehensive review of U.S. oversight of Saudi support for an ideology promoting violence and intolerance globally. In May 2003, the USCIRF issued a report on Saudi Arabia that included a key recommendation that Congress initiate and make public a study on Saudi exportation of intolerance.

-

Received the Judge George Alexander Teitz Award from the Touro Synagogue Foundation, a non-denominational, non-sectarian, non-profit institution. The award is given annually to "an individual or program that best exemplifies the ideals of religious, ethnic, and racial tolerance and freedom, as set forth in President George Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island in 1790." The 2004 award was given in recognition of USCIRF's work to promote religious freedom and to combat religious intolerance throughout the world.

-

Pressed for incorporation of specific provisions on human rights, including religious freedom, in the final version of the Afghanistan Support Act, signed into law on December 4, 2002.

-

One of the first to call for a Special Envoy for Sudan (named by President Bush in September 2001) and recommended three of the four benchmarks the envoy delivered to the government of Sudan.

-

Persuaded Congress in the Sudan Peace Act to require the Administration to take steps to deny access to oil revenues to the Sudanese government in the absence of good faith performance of its commitments in peace negotiations.

-

Recommended to President Bush that he condition a state visit to China on an opportunity to make a major speech on religious freedom and human rights televised live and uncensored to the Chinese People. The speech was delivered on February 21, 2002.

-

Spoke out against the rise in anti-Semitic violence that took place during 2002 in France and Belgium. Congress

introduced and unanimously passed Senate and House resolutions concerning the rise in anti-Semitism in Europe. The Senate version cited the USCIRF's findings and urged the USCIRF to continue documenting the issue.

-

Urged the U.S. government to use multilateral diplomacy to advance the protection of human rights in North Korea, including sponsoring a resolution at the United Nations condemning religious freedom and other human rights violations in North Korea. On March 18, 2003, the House passed a resolution (H. Res. 109) citing USCIRF findings and urging the Secretary of State to introduce and promote the passage of a resolution addressing human rights abuses in North Korea at the 59th Session of the UNHCR in Geneva. The European Union and the United States co-sponsored a resolution.

-

Played a major role in highlighting to U.S. and Pakistan government officials the undemocratic nature of the Pakistani separate-electorate system for minorities. In 2002, the Pakistan government abolished the separate electorates.

-

Urged the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as part of the U.S. delegation, to hold meetings specifically focused on religious freedom concerns, including anti-Semitism.

-

Successfully advised the U.S. House of Representatives to ratify the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement only after it passed legislation calling for the Vietnamese government to make substantial improvements in the protection of religious freedom, sending a signal to the Vietnamese government of America's commitment to human rights. The House overwhelmingly passed the Vietnam Human Rights Act prior to the Bilateral Trade Agreement vote.

-

Successfully recommended that U.S. assistance to Uzbekistan, with the exception of assistance to improve humanitarian conditions and advance human rights, be made contingent upon that government's efforts to improve conditions of religious freedom there. The U.S. Congress included in the Fiscal Year 2002 Supplemental Appropriations Act provisions conditioning assistance to Uzbekistan on the government's substantial and continued progress toward meeting its commitments to human rights, including religious freedom, as agreed to under the Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework between the United States and Uzbekistan.

-

Successfully recommended that President Bush highlight the universal right to religious freedom in his November 10, 2001 U.N. General Assembly speech, affirm that the war on terror is not an excuse for governments to violate religious

freedom, and call for an interim Afghan government that represents all Afghan people.

[Top](#)

14. Does the USCIRF want information about violations of religious freedom abroad?

The Commission welcomes any verifiable information from credible sources about religious persecution in other countries.

[Top](#)

15. Can the Commission help with individual asylum or refugee cases if they are based on a claim of religious persecution?

No. The Commission cannot intervene in individual cases. The Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) develop refugee-policy guidelines. While the Commission can furnish these agencies with information it believes relevant to those guidelines, the DHS judges each case on its individual merits.

[Top](#)